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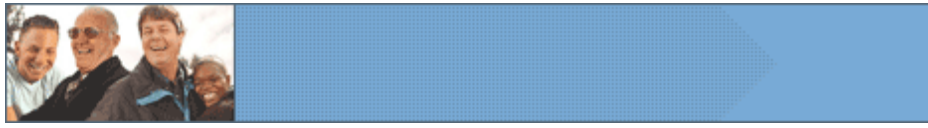
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NEWSPAPER



Teenage Screenplays Get Personal on Sex

By JULIE SALAMON

What would today's teenagers make of "Splendor in the Grass"? In that deliciously overwrought movie about teenage sexuality, released in 1961, Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty star as high-school sweethearts, seething (naturally) with romantic notions and hormonal overload. Their parents won't let them marry, leading him into the arms of a floozy and her into a mental institution.

Suffering remains a constant in adolescent sexuality, judging from "Scenarios USA Shorts," a group of minifilms written by teenagers and being shown on the Showtime Networks tonight, tomorrow and Sunday. But there is far more fear than romance, and parents are pretty much beside the point. In one of the films, "Today I Found Out," a girl learns that her best friend is pregnant. In another, "Just Like You Imagined?," a boy visits a clinic where it is confirmed that he is H.I.V.-positive; he then has to figure out how to tell his girlfriend. Clearly, the range of permissible subjects has expanded since the days of "Splendor in the Grass." In the film "Lipstick," for example, a gay girl decides to come out.

Yet much has remained the same, namely the story of another girl whose first sexual experience leaves her pregnant. The boy involved takes no responsibility when she confronts him in the gym, in a melodramatic scene that is as soapy as "Peyton Place." Welcome to Valentine's Day, better known in sex-ed circles as the kickoff for National Condom Week, a campaign begun in 1978 by students at the University of California at Berkeley. Condom Week has become an institution, endorsed by pharmacists and health organizations, though not yet replacing hearts and flowers — at least, not at the Hallmark store.

These films provide a fascinating counterpoint to the more familiar portrayals of sex elsewhere

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Maura Minsky/Scenarios USA
Samantha Hernandez and Griffin Dunne on the "Today I Found Out" set.

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on television. On "Friends," the group has mated and reproduced blithely over the years. Buffy the Vampire Slayer lost her virginity in high school. On "Joe Millionaire" sexuality is calibrated low and lewd, confirming the findings in a recent study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a health analysis organization, that television is generally raunchier than ever. But it is more cautionary, too: safe sex was mentioned in about a quarter of the shows that included sexual material last season, according to the Kaiser report. The short movies that will appear on the Showtime channels were produced with the special fervency found among social workers and independent filmmakers. They are the product of a national contest sponsored by Scenarios USA, a nonprofit organization that encourages teenagers to write personal scripts about the issues they feel affect them most. The

organization was founded in 1998 by Kristen Joiner, formerly of Habitat for Humanity and other social-action organizations, and Maura Minsky, who has worked as a producer for ABC News and Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, which records the memories of Holocaust survivors. Well-known professionals — including Michael Apted and Griffin Dunne — were enlisted to direct the films. While the Scenarios movies may be a blip in the television landscape, they have a significant afterlife, not in syndication but in classrooms. "No matter how much I stand in front of the classroom and talk about AIDS or human sexuality, when I put a film on, especially one from their point of view, this leads to further discussion," said Maxine Berger, a health education teacher at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, who has used the Scenarios films in her curriculum.

The reactions from her students have been mixed, she said, explaining that Abraham Lincoln High contains many cultural backgrounds expressed in 29 languages. Some of her students, 14 to 17 years old, have arranged marriages waiting for them on graduation; others have managed to remain shielded from the most basic facts of life.

Ms. Berger feels that the Scenarios films, including the fear expressed in them, can lead to valuable discussion about notions of sexual behavior presented through popular culture. "They see people jumping into bed, they see people having sex if they watch 'Sex and the City,'" she said of her students. "They see movies with wining and dining, but that's not reality. The real world isn't very romantic. These students need to come down to earth and get away from television and movies. I try to bring them back to Planet Earth."

But television and movies are very much a part of Planet Earth, and part of the power of the Scenarios films for teenage audiences is their strong production values. Joan Malin, chief executive of Planned Parenthood of New York City, asked a group of teenagers to evaluate

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the films and was surprised to find how much the camerawork mattered.

That group especially liked "From an Objective Point of View." In this engaging 10-minute film, directed by Jim McKay and Hannah Weyer, a girl contemplates whether to break a pact with her best friend, in which both agreed to consult each other before having sex. The film is a shrewd and sweet acknowledgment that a 15-year-old girl can chew gum, play basketball and have powerful sexual desires all at the same time.

"These films are a good stepping-off point for a more in-depth conversation," Ms. Malin said. "Why is it all about fear? What does it mean to go into a clinic? What does it mean to have a kid?"

Sara Hernandez knows what it means to have a child: she has had six of them. When she read about the Scenarios contest two years ago in a Laredo, Tex., newspaper, she encouraged her eldest child, Samantha, to take part. Though Samantha, then about to become a freshman in high school, had no desire to be a writer or a filmmaker, she wrote an autobiographical essay that became one of the 1,250 entries that year — only five of which were produced (the fifth film is not part of the Showtime series). The subject was pregnancy, not hers but everyone else's. Laredo is a border town, a Catholic community with teenage pregnancy rates so high that the high school has a day-care center. Mr. Dunne, the filmmaker, is the father of an adolescent, and his mother grew up in a border town like Laredo. He was drawn to Samantha's story. "It was very personal, very autobiographical," he said. "There's a certain kind of anger in it. It wasn't a story of a girl who was pregnant, but one who was upset with her peers for being so irresponsible."

Eventually, that story became "Today I Found Out," a film about Samantha Hernandez's reaction to learning that her best friend had become pregnant. When Mr. Dunne met Samantha, who is tiny (4 feet 9 inches tall) but self-assured, he wanted her to play herself. Acting was another ambition she doesn't have; she says she would like to be a psychiatrist. But she agreed to the audition, and proved to have no problem being and playing herself.

In December, in Mr. Dunne's TriBeCa office, he and Ms. Hernandez and her mother discussed what it was like to make the film. The Hernandezes were in town, having made their first plane trip, for a screening with other Scenario winners of their works. During the interview Sara Hernandez urged Samantha, now 15, to sit up straight. Samantha replied by pointing at Mr. Dunne, who was slumped comfortably on a couch.

With this glimpse into their collaborative process, it was easy to believe Mr. Dunne when he said: "I was in service of Samantha, her story and her point of view. She had definite final cut. I was using my experience to help her get her story across."

While encouraging artistic freedom and wanting the final product to have a certain finesse, Ms. Joiner and Ms. Minsky of Scenarios USA are most interested in what happens when the films become pedagogy, not entertainment. So, while Mr. Dunne was willing to bow to his

young collaborator, they encouraged Samantha to be less judgmental toward her pregnant peers.

They went to Laredo to help cast the film, hoping to use amateur performers, and gained some insights during auditions. "Teen moms would come in and say, 'Samantha's story isn't who we are,' " Ms. Minsky said. " 'We're young girls who are still in school, with our children. We're not bad people.' It was an educational process for all of them. Samantha had to look at them face to face and listen to them." The logistics were tricky. "You don't want to say it's O.K. to have babies, yet you don't want to villainize young women who have them," Ms. Minsky said.

The films are being distributed in 29 states, often through local boards of education, sometimes through government health departments or mayoral offices. In a way, they give teachers a way to offer an alternative to abstinence-only education policies. Ms. Minsky and Ms. Joiner do not underestimate the power of television to promote what they are doing. "If kids see it in their classroom and then see it on Showtime," Ms. Minsky said, "it's almost validated because it's on television."

Facts of Life

"Scenarios USA Shorts," a four-film package featuring "Lipstick," "Today I Found Out," "From an Objective Point of View" and "Just Like You Imagined?," will be shown on three Showtime television channels this weekend: Showtime Women tonight at 8, Eastern and Pacific times, 7 p.m. Central time; Showtime Too tomorrow night at 9, Eastern and Pacific times (check local listings for Central time); and Showtime Next on Sunday at 7 p.m., Eastern and Pacific times, 6 p.m. Central time. .

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